

I was absolutely delighted when turning to our Old Testament reading set for today to see a reference to camels. At first sight, I thought, well, this will provide a nice link to our gospel reading and the arrival of the wise men who go and visit the baby Jesus. I thought it would give me the opportunity to share a couple of stories about camels that have made me smile this Christmas. The first was you may have heard about the camel on the run. This happened at Bonner Springs in Kansas just before Christmas when the police were called when a camel that was part of a drive-through nativity scene at the National Agricultural Center Hall of Fame had escaped. The police chased this runaway camel down the freeway and eventually cornered it and captured it on a golf course.

But this wasn't the most outrageous camel story I heard this Christmas. Someone gave me an article about a camel beauty pageant in Saudi Arabia. It's not just the idea of a beauty pageant for camels that was the striking part of the story although that is a odd thing to do. No, it was the fact that twelve camels were disqualified from this beauty pageant because they'd received Botox injections and plastic surgery to make them more attractive. Personally, I can't think of anything that can be done to a camel to make it beautiful, but apparently, these poor dozen camels had the size of their ears reduced and their lips and their noses enlarged.

However, I was disappointed when turning to the gospels to see that there is there no mention of camels. The text doesn't say how they got to Bethlehem. It doesn't say that they were kings. It doesn't even say that there were three of them. Only that there were three gifts. We don't know their names, even though a friend of mine in Sunday school was convinced that one was called Frank. But that was only because he misheard gold, myrrh, and "Frank sent this". There's just so much that we don't know about the wise men, but there are three things that we can know. And those are the three things that I just want to mention this morning.

The first is that we do know that the wise men were Gentiles, non-Jew. And this is why we have that reading from Isaiah set for today, not the reference to camels, more the fact that there's a verse about

"nations coming to your light". The wise men had traveled from the nations of the east beyond the land of the Jews, yet they came to worship the child who was born to be King of the Jews, the Messiah, the one born to be the shepherd of God's people, Israel. The wise men were not the people who would've been expected at the birth of the Jewish Messiah. As Gentiles, their presence is a sign that the coming of Jesus was for all people, not simply just for one nation or people.

And in fact, the stable in which Jesus was born was full of unlikely visitors. Not only Gentiles from a foreign country, but shepherds, who were social outcasts and misfits. Right from the beginning, Jesus brought together unlikely people, unlikely people joined as one in their worship of him. And we know from the gospels that this unlikely combination of people continued throughout his ministry. He was surrounded by all sorts of people: those with great material resources and those without, the marginalized, those not welcome in polite society. All gravitated towards Jesus, and all were part of his following and his disciples, which is an important part of Jesus' ministry which we look to maintain as our church in the 21st century.

And today as you know would've been, or you might know, you'll certainly be finding out later was meant to be our Outreach Sunday, but for obvious reasons, it's been postponed to February. But I do just want to pause and mention, and we'll hear more about that important committee later, how vital it is to have a group of people in church life who strive to make connections with people outside of our immediate community. There's always a temptation in the church, and there has been right from the beginning, that the church simply becomes a club of like-minded members. A group of what's in England we call PLU, people like us.

And that temptation, as I say, goes right back to the early church. We see it in the New Testament itself in the debates between those who wanted to restrict membership of the church to those who were Jews, either born Jews or made Jews, and those like St. Paul who wanted to open membership up to Jew and Gentile alike. We're to make our journey of faith in the company of a wide variety of people if we're to

follow Jesus' example. And our outreach committee works hard at developing partnerships with a number of churches and organizations that are made up of the poor, the unhoused, the refugee, and the orphan. And in February, we'll be hearing more about them. And these partnerships are not solely about us passing on checks to the disadvantaged. It's a two-way street. We at St. James need to learn to be shaped by those who are very different to us, whose experience of the world is different.

The second thing, moving on, about the wise men, that we might learn from is their attentiveness. They paid a close attention to the star which was guiding them and followed its movement, and the star led them to where the baby Jesus lay. How can we be more attentive? The God made known in Jesus is Emmanuel, God With Us. God we know is close by. How do we recognize his presence with us? How are we attentive to the God who has come to us as Emmanuel? Do you remember that story in the Old Testament about Elisha who was hiding in the crack as God passed by? And God wasn't in the thunder, he wasn't in the earthquake, he wasn't in the fire, he was in what was called the still small voice. We too need to be attentive to that small voice, the quietness. God is close by to us. We need to be attentive to his presence.

We might pay more attention to a reading of the Bible, to the words of a friend, to a service, or just when we are praying or quietly walking around, being confident that God is Emmanuel, God With Us. Let's be attentive. The wise men had a star to lead them. What do we have? Are we being attentive to God's voice and to God's leading? We like the wise men must be expected to find God in unexpected places. The stable wasn't their first stop. It would appear that first they'd gone to the court of King Herod, which would make sense. That might be where you would expect to find a newborn king. Yet the star led them not to another palace, but rather to a down market stable.

And the wise men were humble enough to be surprised. There's no record of them saying to one another, "Are you sure this is the place? Is the star really over this stable? Surely this can't be where the new king is to be found." There's none of that. They

went straight on in and worshiped the baby Jesus lying in a cattle stall. We should all be humble enough to be open to being led to unexpected places to find God and to be journeying with unexpected people.

The third and final thing about the wise men is that they journeyed with their destination in mind. They weren't simply wandering around the wilderness. They were striving to find the child that they were looking for. And so with us, our lives are not a walk in the woods. We are called for a purpose. We're to pursue a destination. The wise men knew they'd arrived when they worshiped the Christ child. How will we know when we've arrived at our journey's destination? What is it that we are pursuing?

And these are good questions to ask at the beginning of a new year when we're all making resolutions. What are we aiming at? There was a doggedness about the wise men's pursuit of Jesus which personally I find inspiring. I want to follow their example. I'm aware that my own pursuit of Jesus can be marked by idleness and indifference. I want to be inspired by the wise men who wouldn't give up, who kept looking, who kept searching in unlikely places for the God that they had heard of who had come to them. May we too be determined in our following and our worship of Jesus. Amen.